Gender Equality in Islam

Realities vs 'Misconceptions'

In Islam, biological division between man and woman is part of divine purposeful planning; otherwise both are accorded the same respect, dignity and honor as human beings, and are complements, not duplicates, of one another

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From an intellectual point of view, the last two decades of the 21st century (as we are presently passing through the third decade) have witnessed, though not abruptly but having roots deep in the history, various debates and discourses of varied nature. Many of these debates are squarely focused on Islam and Muslims vis-à-vis modern developments and discourses, and one of the crucial and controversial debated topics/ issues, falling in the socio-cultural domains, is the status, position, and role of women in Islam—both past and present.

Like other scholars, across the globe, Muslim scholars of India have also contributed, and are contributing, to the discourse of women in Islam, or more specifically to gender equality/ equity/ parity/complementality—or what I term as "Gender Equ(al)ity". Some significant (selected) works by Indian Muslim scholars and academicians on issues related to women vis-à-vis Islam in general and Muslim Women in India in particular include the works by Sayyid Jalaluddin Umari, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui, Asghar Ali Engineer, Seema Kazi, Mohammad Akram Nadwi, Yoginder Sikand, Maulana Khalid Saifullah Rahmani, Abul Hasan Ali Hasani, Abdur Raheem Kidwai, Muhammad Raziul Nadwi, and many others.

Within this ambiance and in this context, this article is intended to present an assessment and appraisal of four (4) books on 'Women in Islam', so that to get a clear picture of the rights, status, contribution, and role of women in the light of Quran, hadith, Seerah (Prophet's biography) and Islamic history, and problems, issues, and challenges (social, educational, political, intellectual, etc.) faced by (Indian) Muslim women in the current times. These books are discussed and outlined under three (3) major thematic headings, viz. 'Status and Role of Women in the light of the Islamic Foundational Sources (Quran and Sunnah)—an evaluation of Khan's Woman in Islamic Shari'ah (2018) and Kidwai's Women in Islam—What the Quran and Sunnah Say (2020); 'Women during the Prophetic Period—Role, Responsibilities and Contribution' and Siddiqui's Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and Women—A Social Study (2006); and 'Muslim Woman in Theory and Practice: Issues and Challenges'—Content Analysis of Kidwai and Gupta's edited volume on Muslim Woman. Here, in this part, I will try to cover the first major thematic section.

Status and Role of Women in the light of Islamic Foundational Sources:

An Evaluation of Women in Islamic Shari'ah (2018) and Women in Islam (2020)

Maulana Wahiddudin Khan (d. 2021)—an Indian Muslim (spiritual) scholar, a Quran commentator, an ardent advocate of peace, harmony, pluralism, gender justice, interfaith dialogue and social harmony, and the founder of 'Centre for Peace and Spirituality' in 2001 (New Delhi)—has authored over 200 books on Islam and its diverse aspects—ranging from Quran, prophet's biography, theology, morality, spirituality, non-violence, peace/ peace-building, to Islam and modern science gender studies.

On the subject under study, significant books to his credit are: Khatoon-e-Islam/Muslim Women published in 1987 and reprinted in 2017: its Arabic version was published from Cairo in 1994 and its English version, Women between Islam and Western Society, was published in 1995 (republished in 2014); Woman in Islamic Shari'ah (2018; originally published in 1995); Aurat: Maemaar-e-Insaniyat/ Woman: The Builder of Humankind (2008; originally published in 2004); and many booklets such as Polygamy and Islam (2001), Concerning Divorce (2008 [2001]), and Hijab in Islam (2011 [2001]).

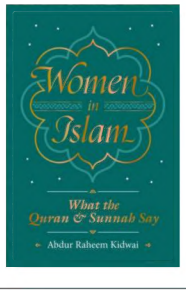
His Woman in Islamic Shari'ah—actually gleaned and extracted from his Women between Islam and Western Society—consists of eleven (11) chapters and discusses the status of women in Islam in the light of teachings of the Quran and hadith, womanhood in Islam, qualities of (or to be possessed by) Muslim women, rights and duties of husband and wife in first five chapters, and presents a detailed discussions on concepts and issues related to divorce, polygamy, dowry, hijab, etc. in the light of Islamic teachings and history in chapters 6-10, and ends with a chapter on the "success in marriage".

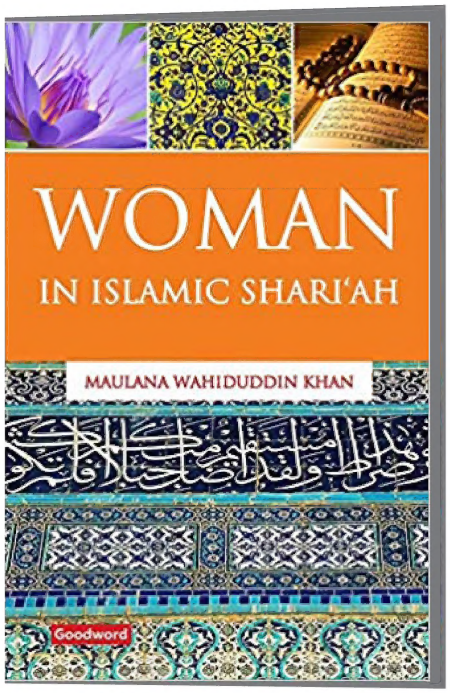
He begins the 'Foreword' (pp. 11-14) with Edward William Lane's (Selections from Kuran, 1982, p. XC) statement that "the fatal point in Islam is the degradation of woman". For Khan, this "ill-considered observation" gained such currency in the succeeding centuries that it became "an established fact" and instead of having elapsed this conviction has rather "deepened". In this backdrop, he, thus, asserts: "To interpret the Islamic concept of woman as 'degradation' of woman is to distort the actual issue. Islam has never asserted that woman is inferior to man: it has only made the point that woman is differently constituted" (p. 11). This is precisely the main theme and thesis of this book.

Quoting numerous Quranic verses (like Q. 2: 228; 3: 195; 4: 7, 19, 124; 9: 71; 16: 97; 30: 21; 40:40) as well as Ahadith related to women, Khan (in chapter 1, "Qur'an and Hadith", pp. 15-19) affirms that both the foundational sources of Islam "give detailed commandments regarding women, and also lay down clear guidelines for the relationship between men and women" and they "highlight the most important aspects of feminine virtue and the standing which a woman should have vis-à-vis her husband and father" (p.15).

In the second chapter, "The qualities of a believing woman" (pp. 20-27), he refers to the 'Basic Attributes of Men and Women' as depicted in Q. 33: 35 and Q. 66 (pp. 21-24). These qualities, taken together, "constitute an ideal, not just for men, but for both sexes"; they "form the basis of Islam" (p. 25). In this chapter, he further asserts that just as "men function on different planes of religiosity, so do women have their own separate spheres of religious effectiveness"; and besides the domestic sphere, it is possible for a "talented women to further the cause of religion when the right opportunity presents itself" (pp. 25, 26). In this case, he cites the examples of Aishah (RA) and Binte Imam Abu Jafar al-Tahavi and their contribution to the religious knowledge showing "the nature and extent of the contribution which can be made by believing Muslim women to the cause of Islam" (p. 27).

Similarly, in 3rd chapter, "Womanhood in Islam" (pp. 28-37), Khan quotes Q. 4: 1 ("Mankind, fear your Lord who created you from one soul and created man's mate from the same soul") and demystifies the notion that "Eve was created from Adam's rib" in its explanation, saying that it is a "biblical explanation [Bible, Genesis, 2: 21-23], not a Quranic one", for there is not a single verse which supports this notion. On the contrary, the fact is that "Eve was created—not from Adam himself—but from the same species as Adam", as is elucidated in several verses like Q. 16: 72; 30: 21; and 42: 11, wherein the word for "Soul (nafs) has been used to mean 'species'" (pp. 28-29). He summarizes this discussion aptly in these words: "women and men are from the same species. Biologically speaking, women have not been extracted from the bodies of their male counterparts. God fashioned them according to His Will, just as He fashioned men in accordance with His Almighty Will and Power" (p. 30). In the explanation of the Ahadith, like "women have been created from a rib" and "a woman is like a rib, if you try to straighten it, it will break", he mentions that it





should be "taken metaphorically, not literally" for it refers to "the delicacy of women's nature" (pp. 31, 33).

In the 4th chapter he highlights "The status of woman" (pp. 38-48) and stresses, in unequivocal terms, that "a woman enjoys the same status as that of a man" in Islam, as is evident from Q. 3: 195 ("You are members, one of another"). "There is no difference between man and woman as regards status, rights and blessings both in this world and in the hereafter. Both are equal participants so far as the carrying out of the functions of daily living is concerned" (p. 38). He further mentions that the "biological division of human beings into male and female is the result of purposeful planning on the part of the Creator. ... Man and woman in the eyes of Islam are not the duplicates of one another, but the complements" and the "Islamic precepts for men and women are based on their respective, natural constitutions" (pp. 38-39; italics added for emphasis).

Similarly, in the explanation of Q. 4: 34, "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has made some of them to excel others", Khan writes that it is "an additional, not a superior quality" (p. 46; italics added), because the Arabic word Fadilah is "used in the scriptures to indicate the additional, masculine quality of protectiveness. For a household to be properly run, it should, of necessity, have a guardian. Guardianship is rightly entrusted to the family member who is best qualified to undertake this responsibility—namely, the husband, for protectiveness is a virtue which has been granted by nature in greater measure to men than to women. Far from mentioning absolute masculine superiority, the above-quoted verse only implies that man is the master in the home because of the additional attributes with which he has been endowed by nature" (pp. 46-47). Thus, he translates the Arabic phrase Faddala ba'dahum 'ala ba'd as "excelled some on other", which occurs several times in the Qur'an, as in Q. 13: 4 which refers to the various kinds of crops and fruits growing from the same soil and water, "Yet We make some excel others in taste". "Just as two different kinds of fruit will differ in color, taste, shape and texture, without one being superior or inferior to the other, so also do men and women have their different qualities which distinguish the male from the female without there being any question of superiority or inferiority. If men and women have been endowed with different capacities, it is so that they will play their respective divinely predetermined roles in life with greater ease and effectiveness." (p. 48).

In the 5th chapter, he discusses "Muslim Women" (pp. 49-78) in Islamic history, and argues that they have "played significant roles and, by their feats, have demonstrated not only the vast arena which Islam affords them for the performance of noble and heroic deeds, but also the exaltedness of the position accorded to women in Islamic society" (p. 49). In his support of this argument, he presents the examples of various women "who played an effective role in Islam" (p. 50): e.g., Aishah (RA) is presented as a "woman of notable intelligence, whose intellectual gifts were fittingly utilized in the service of Islam"; the example of Mary, the mother of Prophet Isa/ Jesus (AS) and Khadijah bint Khuwaylid (RA), the Prophet's (pbuh) first wife, are presented as 'Two Remarkable Women' who "subordinated their own wills to that of Almighty" (pp. 49, 50-51). In this chapter, he also refers to the examples of women of his own family who "in times of dire distress, were totally Islamic in their conduct" (p. 70). All this is thus expounded to reveal that the "position of women in Islam ... is a matter neither of conjecture, abstract theory nor of ancient history ... [but] is a matter of actual fact", to which the author himself is a witness (p. 69).

In the 6th chapter he discusses the "rights of husband and wife" (pp. 79-94) and argues that the "rights of men and women, in reality, are not a matter of legal lists, but rather a matter of good living" (p. 93).

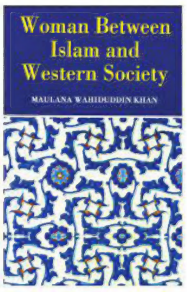
These are followed by a detailed discussion, in the light of Islamic teachings and historical evidences, on concepts and issues "concerning divorce", "polygamy and Islam", "Dowry", and "Hijab in Islam" in chapters 7-10, respectively (pp. 95-114, 115-24, 125-,40, and 141-50) and the important points derived from these discussions are: "divorce should be sought only under unavoidable circumstances" as it has been described in the Traditions as "the most hateful of all lawful things in the eyes of God" (pp. 100-101); "lawful polygamy of Islam" is the solution to the "imbalance" of number of women over men which permits women "to opt on their own free will for marriage with anyone who can give them fair treatment to more than one wife" (p. 124); the "custom of dowry [Jahez in Urdu] is not Islamic" practice, but is (specifically) practised by Muslims of the Sub-Continent; however, Islam sanctions mahr (dower)—a sum of money handed over by groom to the bride at the time of marriage—which is "a token of his willing acceptance of the responsibility of bearing all necessary expenses of his wife" (pp. 125, 130); and on Hijab (veil) or Purdah in Urdu, where he mostly relies on the views and opinions of Shaykh Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, he maintains that "it is preferable for a woman to cover her face, it is not compulsory for her to do so" and that "hijab in itself should not be a source of attraction" or "become a display of finery referred to in the Quran as tabarruj", as in Q. 24: 31 and 33: 33; and the "garment should cover the entire body of a woman except the face and hands, and should not become an attraction in itself. Neither should it be thin, nor tight. It should not accentuate the body ... [and] should not suggest fame" (pp. 144, 147).

The book ends with a chapter on "Success in marriage" (pp. 151-159), in which the author suggests that the "success and failure of married life depends entirely upon the bride's willingness or unwillingness to adapt" to a "conciliatory stance" (p. 152) and he illustrates this with two examples, one each of a failed and successful marriage (pp. 152-53).

Keeping in view the overall subject-matter and the issues and topics it highlights and deliberates upon, it is fair to assert that Woman in Islamic Shari'ah indeed highlights the real status, position, role, rights and responsibilities given to women in Islam and thoroughly discusses the crucial (and mostly misunderstood and misinterpreted) concepts and issues related to women—like divorce, polygamy, dowry, hijab, etc. In sum, the book makes a significant contribution to this much hyped (but misconstrued) subject.

Abdur Raheem Kidwai—Professor of English and Director, UGC-HRDC and K. A. Nizami Centre for Quranic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), India—has contributed significantly to Islamic scholarship, especially to the varied aspects of Qur'anic studies including the 'gender studies' aspects. His Women in Islam (which draws mainly, and is gleaned, from his book chapter on same theme, "Is the Quran a Male-Centred Religious Text?", featuring in his 2019 co-edited volume, Muslim Woman: this book will be evaluated in Part-II of this write-up) is a succinct and slim volume highlighting the rights, status, role, and contribution of Muslim women in the light of foundational Islamic texts as well as demystifying and deconstructing the misconceptions and misconstructions on the vital but sensitive issue of 'Gender Parity'.

Divided into three main sections, preceded by a 'Preface' (vii-x) and ending with Index (pp. 170-80), it attempts to providing readers with an "opportunity to consider some of the references to women in authentic Islamic sources in order to shape an informed view" as well as to "let readers appreciate the high status that women enjoy in Islam" (p. vii). A simple compilation of those pas-



sages from the Quran and hadith collections which 'refer to or address women specifically', it highlights the "Islamic stance on womanhood: her existence as a creation of Allah, her purpose of life as a slave of Allah, her capacity for attaining self-development and proximity with Allah and her accomplishments", and brings into the sharper light the fact that in the Quran "men and women are both accorded the same respect, dignity and honour as human beings", and both are repeatedly addressed and urged "to be active, positive stakeholders in the construction of God-conscious society and for attaining salvation as pious individuals" (pp. viii, ix; italics added for emphasis). Maulana Khan also highlights similar statements.

Khan's and Kidwai's Books in Sum: Considering the overall subject-matter and the issues and topics highlighted and deliberated upon in these books, it is fair to assert that (taken together) Woman in Islamic Shari'ah and Women in Islam make significant contribution to the literature depicting the status/role/ position of women in Islam in its real perspective/ context and in defying and expunging misconceptions regarding the role and responsibilities bestowed to women by their Creator—and thus are valuable works on brining into sharp light the real perspective of 'Gender Equ(al)ity' in Islam. {Contd.}

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